Earthquakes in London

by Mike Bartlett

Synopsis

‘Earthquakes in London’ is the story of three sisters: Sarah, the eldest, is an environment minister in the newly formed coalition government; Freya, the middle child, is a teaching assistant who is pregnant with her first baby and the youngest, Jasmine, has just been kicked out of university and is the wildest of the three. The play moves between the past, present and future.

The play begins in Cambridge (1968) where Robert Crannock and Grace are on their first date. The date goes well and the couple hit it off. We then move to the present day in which Grace has passed away and Robert has no contact with his three daughters (Sarah, Freya and Jasmine). Steve, the husband of heavily pregnant Freya, prepares to depart on a business trip. She is very worried as there is talk of an earthquake hitting London. Meanwhile her youngest sister Jasmine meets Tom, a university student, in a coffee shop. Telling him she has been kicked out of university, she invites him to see her dance at a club that evening. The eldest sister Sarah, despite being invited to see Jasmine perform, is unable to attend and Colin her husband goes instead. Peter, one of Freya's pupils, turns up at her house and they end up smoking and drinking together. He encourages her to get out and therefore she packs a bag and leaves Peter alone in her house. We begin to see the cracks in Sarah and Colin’s marriage as they argue about dinner and she tells him to get a job.

In Act 2 we go back to 1973. Robert Crannock (the father) is met by two businessmen from the UK’s biggest airline. He agrees to produce a report predicting the effect on the climate of increased emissions from air travel.

Back in the present, Freya is sat by the ponds in Hampstead Heath. She arranges to meet Sarah who is reluctant to make time for this. On her way, Freya meets an old woman and confesses that she is worried her baby hates it inside her. The woman then transforms into her younger self with her husband and predicts a gathering storm. Before Freya arrives, Jasmine turns up at Sarah’s office, which surprises her. Jasmine tells Sarah that she slept with Tom who she met in the coffee shop and he took some photos of her and is threatening to use them unless Sarah stops the airport expansions in the UK. Sarah dismisses this and her and Jasmine argue before Jasmine storms out. Sarah receives a letter from someone called Carter asking for a meeting. She tells her assistant to arrange it for that afternoon and calls Freya to cancel their plans.
Back in 1973, unhappy with the results of Robert’s preliminary investigation, the airline want Robert’s results to play down the effect that the emissions will have on the planet. Accepting a large cheque Robert agrees to publish fake results.

At dinner with Carter, Sarah demands to know why he has sent her copies of her father’s reports for the airline industry. He tells Sarah how embarrassing it would be for her father, now a leading climate expert, to have been shown covering up the effects of airline emissions. His attempt to blackmail her opposition to airport expansion fails. She tells him she hates her father and will gladly pass the report to the press herself. Carter offers Sarah an exciting job offer to change things from the inside.

In the present, Freya is becoming desperately worried and checks herself into hospital. The doctor explains there is nothing wrong but offers her a scan, which she agrees to.

Jasmine turns up to Sarah’s house and ends up smoking pot and drinking with Sarah’s husband Colin. Jasmine and Colin kiss and he confesses that he is unhappy with Sarah. Although Steve said he was leaving for business he has actually gone to Scotland to meet Freya’s estranged father, Robert. Robert is cold and confrontational but eventually the two begin to talk about Freya’s recent visit to her father. Robert finally confesses that he told Freya to abort the baby because it will hate her for bringing it into a horrible world of chaos. Steve is furious at Robert for suggesting this.

Freya, still in hospital, believes she can lip read her daughter asking for help on the ultra sound scan. The act ends with a piercing scream from the foetus.

Back in 1991, grieving after his wife’s death, Robert tells Sarah that there is no point pretending he loves any of his daughters as he only loves his deceased wife, Grace. Sarah, upset, packs a bag and leaves with her sisters. Robert ignores the calls of an upset, young Freya asking if she can have her mother’s dress, this voice turns into her older self, telling Robert she is pregnant.

Back in the present, Sarah tells Colin she is leaving politics for a job on the board of the airline. He argues with her about how she used to be a campaigner when Jasmine enters from the spare bedroom she persuades Colin to leave and come shopping with her. Jasmine helps Colin pick a new set of clothes and recreates his look.

At lunch with Carter, Sarah introduces Tom. She tells Carter she has changed her mind about accepting the job offer and that the total halt to the expansion of airports has been cleared by the PM and will be announced that afternoon.

Arriving back in London, Steve rushes to meet Freya at Waterloo Bridge. Peter’s increasingly strange behaviour concludes in the revelation that he is in fact a carrier signal for Freya’s unborn daughter Emily. Emily tells Freya how difficult her life is. Confirming Freya’s worst fears about the future, Emily takes her to the side of Waterloo Bridge where she tells her to jump. Below, a crowd shout at Freya to jump, as Jasmine, Colin, Sarah and Steve arrive to see her standing on the edge. Freya clings to the side of the bridge. A policeman attempts to get her to come down, as the earthquake hits. Letting go of the side, Freya falls into the River Thames.

2525: A narrator tells the story of Solomon who travelled barefoot to London proclaiming the new enlightenment from Waterloo Bridge. Awaking in the year 2525, Grace, Freya’s dead mum, tells her that her body has been frozen and she has been reawakened at the time medical science was able to save her. Grace needs to know whether Freya knew or had heard of Solomon. Grace dismisses Freya’s idea that it might be her.

In present day London, Freya’s family must face the fact that she has been severely injured and is unlikely to survive. Gathering at the hospital, Jasmine finally meets her father. Having saved the baby, the doctors offer Steve the choice to wake Freya and let her see her baby before she dies. Sarah and Colin eventually agree to divorce.

Frantic and confused, Freya awakes in the present day and hugs Steve. He delivers the news of her impending death and the birth of their baby daughter. The play ends with Emily (Freya and Steve’s daughter) age 16 wearing Grace’s dress that Freya used to love. Emily prepares to leave her house and walk barefoot to London.
The author and his influences

Mike Bartlett was born in 1980 in Oxford. He is becoming one of Britain’s most exciting new contemporary writers. Bartlett began by writing a radio play called ‘Not Talking’ in 2007. This won two awards and Bartlett continued his writing ever since.

When asked about his influences for *Earthquakes in London*, Bartlett commented that climatologist James Lovelock, a man in his 90s who believes that we are all doomed, inspired it. James believes that the world is going to get a lot worse and something bad is on the way but we are ignoring this fact. This was the starting point for the play. Bartlett wanted to explore climate change and how it can change our behaviour in the modern world.

Key themes

**Family**

The play centres around the lives of three sisters and their non-existent relationship with their father since their mother’s death. The sisters are all very different and not overly close but the play explores how their lives crossover and how their relationship affects their lives. Sarah, the oldest sister, spent her life bringing up Freya and Jasmine after their father admitted that he didn’t love them.

Jasmine is very angry at the fact she hasn’t met her father and this is often directed towards Sarah.

The play also explores the generation gap between the three sisters. They are constantly talking about the future of the world and the environment, but their father has had a huge impact on this through publishing fake results for the airline survey. He tells Freya that having a baby is dangerous in this world yet this never stopped him from having the three girls.

The breakdown of the marriage of Sarah and Colin is also significant in exploring how family life can be affected through career choices and workload.

**The Contemporary World**

*Earthquakes in London* explores modern day issues. It is full of short scenes that flick between the past, present and future. All of the scenes link with one another and follow the same family in some way. Mike Bartlett wanted to ensure that the issues in the play are indicative of the time we live in. The script suggests that the play should contain an overload of modern technology including recorded music and projections. The characters are constantly using phones and technology to reflect the modern world today. Freya is scared about being pregnant mainly because she is worried about what the future brings. Her father Robert has told her that her baby will hate her for bringing it into the modern world. The whole play revolves around the anxieties of the modern world and how it will develop and change.

**Environment**

Central to the play is climate change, which is a real and present issue. Consequences of this include flooding, extinction of species and famine. Climate change is responsible for many deaths each year. Tom’s story in the play is a small part of the storyline but highlights how his family in Eritrea are suffering the effects of global warming and in the end this story becomes central to Sarah’s government policy. All of the characters are somehow involved in the forthcoming crisis and every one of their choices is made with this in the background.
Performance characteristics and staging requirements of the text

The staging and use of visual elements in the play will be the most challenging. As the play flicks between time periods, students will need to find creative ways of making this clear to the audience. There are often a lot of cross-overs between scenes therefore students will need to focus on ways to show this, for example using cross-cutting or split-scene. Stage design will also need careful consideration by students. They could also consider a range of historical, social, cultural contexts (namely climate change which is at the centre of the text) and create innovative resonances for a potential audience to make this message hard-hitting.

Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

Students will need to be able to analyse the play and be able to offer an analysis as well as a potential dramatic realisation of the play for performance. Earthquakes in London offers so many potentially creative ideas for staging and performance that students may have trouble thinking outside the box.

*Earthquakes in London* uses a lot of technology and lends itself to a non-naturalistic performance style. This may prove difficult for students to understand how to stage certain aspects for example the foetus at Freya's scan screaming for help. The play will need to be explored practically to allow students to work to develop imaginative staging ideas and to realise the performance potential the script offers.

Students will need to be able to undertake independent research as well as being able to work with others as they study the play. The ability to verbally communicate their ideas in response to the play and translate this understanding into writing will be a vital aspect. Students need to be given opportunities to develop their writing to articulate their response to the text.
Activities

The activities below expect students to have read the full text before beginning the exploration.

1. Augusto Boal’s ‘Bombs and Shields’

Due to the characters’ complex relationships, students should begin by trying to explore their relationships with other characters in this text through the use of proxemics. Bombs and Shields is an exercise in which each student should choose a character to be (ideally they would all be different ones) and choose a bomb (a character they should stay away from) and a shield (a character they should stay very close to). Students should not reveal who they have chosen and they should begin to move around the room trying to avoid and remain close to the relevant characters.

After this exercise has taken place, allow the students to discuss and reveal who they chose and encourage them to support their decisions with clear reasons, e.g. I played Sarah and I chose Colin as my bomb to symbolise the breakdown of their marriage and the distance coming between them.

2. Character exploration of the three sisters

Sarah, Freya and Jasmine are the central characters in the text. They have lost their mother and we know that Sarah has brought the other two up, however they aren’t overly close in the present.

Allow the students to explore the relationship between the sisters by looking at their past, ask students to create a prequel scene at different key stages in the sisters lives to show events that could have affected their relationships in different ways.

Students should be able to give clear reasons for their thoughts on what has happened in the sisters’ lives to justify their ideas. They should find evidence in the text where appropriate.

3. Inner monologue

Students (or the teacher) should choose a scene to explore from the text. When they have read through the scene they must return to the beginning and instead of saying the actual line written on the page; they should say what they think their character is thinking. When they go back and read the actual lines again, the inner monologue they created before should have an impact on their vocal delivery of the lines and the body language of the character.

4. Actioning

To further explore the subtext behind the lines and explore the complexity of the characters’ relationships, students could use actioning (a technique favoured by Max Stafford Clarke). This technique requires students to add a verb to each line to encourage them to explore how it should be said due to the line’s intention. For example “I tell off” or “I seduce”. Students should go through a scene and action each line to explore various ways the line could be delivered.

5. Staging the text

Students could work in groups as designers to consider the staging requirements of the text. They could all work as one or split into disciplines e.g. staging, props, costume, lighting, sound, new media.

Students should consider the following:

- What are the essential design elements?
- How can you use the stage effectively to jump between different times?
- What are the textual constraints?
- Where have the characters come from? Where do they go? Consider entrances and exits.
- How can the scene be blocked according to the action?
- How can the use of grouping, levels and proxemics show the status/relationships between the characters.
- What type of staging style would be most appropriate?
- What advantages/disadvantages does this staging style have when staging the play?
- Discuss the themes of the play. List key moments that link to these themes. How can the significance of these key moments be presented on stage?
- How can the transitions be made between scenes?
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